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A Memoir of

RICHARD HODGSON

1855–1905

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By M. A. De W. H.

Read at the

Annual Meeting of the Tavern Club

6 *May* 1906

BF1021
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JUL 3 1911

Richard Hodgson

On the twentieth of December, 1905, there died in the over-active exercise of his body one whose life was preëminently an exercise of the spirit. Indeed, it was as an explorer of the spiritual realm, an adventurer beyond the bourne from which he believed the return of travelers could be proved and guided, that he was chiefly known to the world at large. Before recalling the distinctive qualities of his private life as we knew it, let us look for a moment at the main facts of what may be called his public career.

Richard Hodgson was born in Melbourne, Australia, in 1855. In due time he graduated and took a law course at

Melbourne University. This was followed by study and graduation at the English Cambridge, where he devoted himself especially to the mental and moral sciences. After six months more of study at the University of Jena, he found himself, 1882–83, delivering University Extension lectures in the north of England. In 1884–85 he served as lecturer at Cambridge on the philosophy of Herbert Spencer. From 1882 to 1887 he was active in the investigations of the English Society for Psychical Research. One of his most important and conspicuous pieces of work in this period was the exposure of Madame Blavatsky, for the accomplishment of which he spent some months in India. Another was the penetrating study of S. J. Davey's "Imitations

by Conjuring of Phenomena sometimes attributed to Spirit Agency." In 1887 he came to Boston as secretary of the American branch of the Society for Psychical Research.

The results of his whole-hearted devotion to this task may be seen in the Reports of the Society, and in what he did towards completing the monumental work on "Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death" by his friend F. W. H. Myers. Through the last years of his life he was peculiarly identified with the trance sittings of Mrs. Piper and the communications from the spirit-groups of which he recognized "Phinuit" and "Imperator" as the central figures. Though finally surrendering his own life to the direction of "Imperator,"

he sought to retain in his work of interpretation for others the attitude of the investigator insisting upon the best of evidence. It was his unflagging desire to accumulate a mass of evidence sufficient to form a reasonable hypothesis regarding the "spirit world."

There is no lack of pathos, from one point of view, in his having dropped this work unfinished. From another there is the satisfaction of his having passed quickly, as he wished to pass, from the present to the future life. More than one of his friends recall the eagerness with which he said only last summer, "I can hardly wait to die." A keen intellectual curiosity regarding what awaited him was his own chief concern about death. Then came that which he had desired;

and neither the doubters nor his fellow-believers could wholly grudge him the opportunity to carry forward—as he would have said—"on the other side" the work to which he gave his life on earth. With a swift passage from the known to the unknown sphere, the visible life among us came to an end.

To those who knew him in private his utter confidence in the work was one of its highest justifications. To hear him talk of that "other side" as if it were literally a room separated from the house of life only by walls and doors of glass, to see him year in and year out devoting to an idea intellectual and moral powers which might well have won him many of the rewards which men prize most, —this was to realize in a measure the

spirit which has animated the idealists of every age, the spirit through which a man saves his life by losing it.

The general and the personal significance of his work were so inextricably twined together that it is hard to discuss it at all without seeming to invade the inmost sanctities. Yet in this company it is no sacrilege to quote from a private letter of 1901 a passage which reveals at once the intense conviction of Richard Hodgson's belief and the pure spiritual faith of which it was the embodiment: "I went through toils and turmoils and perplexities in '97 and '98 about the significance of this whole Imperator régime, but I have seemed to get on a rock after that,—I seem to understand clearly the reasons for incoherence and obscur-

ity, etc., and I think that if for the rest of my life from now I should never see another trance or have another word from Imperator or his group, it would make no difference to my *knowledge* that all is well, that Imperator, etc., are all they claim to be and are indeed messengers that we may call divine. Be of good courage whatever happens, and pray continually, and let peace come into your soul. Why should you be distraught and worried? Everything, absolutely everything,—from a spot of ink to all the stars,—every faintest thought we think of to the contemplation of the highest intelligence in the cosmos, are all in and part of the infinite Goodness. Rest in that Divine Love. All your trials are known better than you know them yourself. Do

you think it is an idle word that the hairs of our heads are numbered? Have no dismay. Fear nothing and trust in God."

His friends and brothers here—for surely friendship and brotherhood were almost indistinguishable in his relations with us—care especially to remember one thing—that this idealist did not detach himself from the most earth-bound of us all. Though so much of his commerce was with the unseen, his feet kept step with ours on solid earth. In the field of mental activities, there was no one better qualified to discuss the freshest topics of physical science, the events and tendencies in the world of affairs, and their deeper significances. There was no one here to whom the pleased discoverer of a new minor poet—since the

major phenomenon is so rare—could come with such conviction that his discovery had been anticipated. Indeed it was no unusual thing to have Dick quote you off-hand the new singer's best verses, with all the fervor and understanding which made him the favorite interpreter of certain of our own poets. One cannot forget how he entered into the reading of other men's verses. No matter if there were twenty valentines or prize songs to be read in a single evening, every one of them rang out in his loyal voice as heartily as if Dick himself were the author, bent upon bringing forth every particle of meaning or wit the lines might contain. His intimate association with the more serious muse will be a recurring remembrance to

most of us, when Christmas and New Year come round without the card which brought us his poetic greeting, in which an old or a new poet seemed merely the mouthpiece of the sender's own thought.

Nor was this community of interest restricted by any means to the things of the mind. The healthy Anglo-Saxon devotion to every exhibition of physical prowess was conspicuously characteristic of this child of the spirit. The professional ball game, the college boat race and foot-ball battle excited his keenest interest; and it was like him to double his enjoyment in these sports by the companionship of one or more of us. The cheery call for volunteers for the 2.20 boat must remain one of the bright-

est memories of our summer lunch-table, not only for those who used to join the almost daily expeditions to Nantasket, and huddled into their clothes while Dick's head was still a mere speck amongst the ocean steamers and harbor islands, but for all whose paths led inland or to other shores. In the pool-room, its dominating figure was for the tyro the most patient and encouraging of teachers, for the expert the most formidable of rivals, for the box the most active inciter of tickets. Is it—by the way—a mere coincidence that the parrot, since losing his most devoted friend and champion, has stood in less need of a defender than ever before? In the squash-court Dick was the best and gentlest of antagonists in victory or defeat.

From the gallery above it his initial inquiry, "Score?" his rallying shouts—"two-yard-line," "anybody's game"—put spirit into the flagging player, and made him happily conscious of a gallery to which it was no shame to play. Downstairs by the fire-place and at the table above, it was generally Dick who first taught the new member to know himself here by his Christian name, and to feel that gray hairs and youth might after all be contemporaries.

Just because he was the contemporary of all, the man between whom and the rest of us the barriers were the fewest and the lowest, he typified, perhaps more than any individual member of the club, the spirit of the Tavern. The last words that certain of us heard him

speak are a memorable illustration of his unique and beautiful place among us. Eight or ten men were gathered in the lower room—one defending an unpopular cause, which the others were hotly denouncing. The debate was growing acrimonious. Down from luncheon came Dick. "Go for the scoundrel," he thundered from the stairs. "Don't give him a chance to speak; down with him! Don't let him be heard!" The genial shout, with its animating love of fair play as well as of peace, drew a laugh and a response. "How can anybody be heard when you're in the room, Dick?" There was another laugh—and the unpleasantness was past. A few moments later Dick left the club. That evening his lifeless body was carried upstairs.

A purity of nature which leaves his friends unable, even should they try, to recall a single taint of coarseness in his word or thought; a sincerity like that of a true-hearted boy; an unselfishness and absence of egotism which made our concerns far more often than his the topics of our personal intercourse; a self-respect which included in its operations a body as wholesome as the air and sea he loved;—these must surely be remembered in any enumeration of the qualities which made his personality so rare a blending of the spirit and the flesh. Who better than our well-loved friend can remain for us the interpretation and type of this blending? What man of us has lived in the flesh a life so illuminated and controlled by the spirit that the

transition from the seen to the unseen could have seemed so short a journey as for him? One whose spirit, like our friend's, was clothed with the whole armor of faith and courage has told what it is for such a man to die: "In the hot-fit of life, a-tiptoe on the highest point of being, he passes at a bound on to the other side. The noise of the mallet and chisel is scarcely quenched, the trumpets are hardly done blowing, when, trailing with him clouds of glory, this happy-starred, full-blooded spirit shoots into the spiritual land."*

It is much to have left behind one what Richard Hodgson has left to us,— a memory the sweetest, the purest, the best-beloved. When his spirit had gone

* R. L. Stevenson, conclusion of *Aes Triplex*.

on its final quest that memory in all its freshness remained to hallow the room in which he shared so many of our delights. There it brought together an unexampled assemblage of the friends of him who had come to us a stranger. For his sake the place which was so truly his home must be, to us who like to call ourselves his family, more than ever unlike all other places. For his sake we shall sing without sorrow,

Meum est propositum in Taberna mori,—

for we shall sing it, remembering what it is both to live and to die here, and rejoicing always in the sense of his continuing fellowship.

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